Fort Benton Bridge
Spanning the Missouri River
near State Route 230
Fort Benton
Chouteau County
Montana

HAER No. MT-9

HAER
MONT,
8 - FOBE,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HAER
MONT,
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

Fort Benton Bridge

MT-9

Location: Spanning the Missouri River near State Route 230 in Fort Benton, Chouteau County, Montana.

Date of Construction: 1888; 1908

Present Owner: Chouteau County
Chouteau County Courthouse
Fort Benton, Montana 59442

Present Use: Abandoned

Significance: Fort Benton has a long history in Montana. It was a fur trading post before the formation of Montana Territory. During the gold mining era of 1860's, Fort Benton was a major commercial center for the region west because it was the head of steam boat navigation. Supplies were shipped up the Missouri River to Fort Benton and then overland to Helena, Virginia City and the numerous smaller gold camps. Fort Benton lost that distinction when steamboat traffic stopped with the decline of placer mining in 1870's and the coming of railroads into the Territory in the 1880's. However, the town continued to be a trade center for the agricultural region surrounding it as the Great Northern Railroad passed a line through from the Hi-Line on the north to Great Falls and Butte to the southwest. In order to hold the town's trade with the Judith Basin to the east from other competing trade centers, the Benton Bridge Company built the Fort Benton Bridge in 1888. The Milwaukee Bridge and Iron Works of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was contracted to construct the bridge. As orginally constructed, the bridge had, from the southeast bank, a 75-foot pin-connected Pratt through span, three 175-foot pin-connected Baltimore through spans, and a 225-foot swing span. The swing span was required by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, because, even though steam boat traffic had ceased on the Missouri River, the river to Fort Benton was still considered a navigable river. In fact, the swing span was not operated until 1908 when the riverboat O.K. passed through the bridge. Shortly thereafter, on June 6, 1908,

the swing span was washed out by the flooding Missouri River, bloated by rains which caused devasting floods throughout the State. Permission was received from the Corps to replace the swing span with a fixed span and by November of 1908, O.E. Peppard, Missoula bridge builder, had completed the present 225-foot, pin-connected Camelback through truss. The superstructure of the small Pratt is comprised as follows: lower chord is eyebars; verticals are four laced angle sections, some having been replaced with steel I-beams; diagonals are eyebars and turnbuckles; upper chord is two laced channel sections, unusual in that the channels form the top and bottom of the upper chord rather than the sides. The superstructures of the Parker trusses are comprised as follows: lower chord is eyebars; hip verticals are eyebars, other full length verticals are two laced channel sections, the upper sub-divided verticals are four laced channels and the lower sub-divided verticals are eyebars; diagonals are eyebars and turnbuckles, except those intersecting the inclined end posts which are two laced channels; upper chord is a continuous steel plate riveted atop composite Z-sections (again unusual) with lacing bars riveted to their lower flanges. The superstructure of the Camelback is comprised as follows: lower chord is eyebars; verticals are two laced channel sections; diagonals are eyebars and turnbuckles; upper chord is a continuous plate riveted atop two channel sections with lacing bars riveted to their lower flanges. For the older spans, wood stringers rest on the top flange of steel I-beam floor beams which are bolted to the verticals. For the newer span, I-beam stringers are riveted to the web of steel I-beam floor beams which are riveted to the verticals. Portions of the deck are of wooden planking and the rest are wooden 2x4's on edge. The spans are supported by piers consisting of wood and concrete pilings encased in riveted steel plate. The bridge is no longer

used for vehicular traffic, but there are community plans to use the bridge for a pedestrian connection between the Fort Benton Historic District and a park on the east side of the Missouri River.

Transmitted by: Kevin Murphy, Historian HAER, 1984; from data compiled by Fredric L. Quivik, 1979

ADDENDUM TO
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Fort Benton
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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